

Marketing Science Centres

Marilyn Hoyt, G. S. Rautela & Michael Savino

Abstract

Science Centres continually seek to increase the size of their audiences—to serve as many of the public as possible. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly necessary to allow those who use science centres to help support the costs of their services. Their fees are part of “earned income” and earned income is key to sustaining the quality of existing exhibits, programs and demonstrations. And it is also key to trying new ideas. The annual cycle of marketing activity and expenditures keeps both of these goals in mind. However, in India the former goal gets priority as science centres are largely funded by the government except in case of Science City, Kolkata which is built and run as a self-sustainability model.

Admissions Marketing: A Different Mindset

When thinking about audience development, science centres often consider marketing as an expense, rather than as an investment. After all, if a science centre offers a quality experience, why should there be a need to spend money on paid advertising, public relations and audience surveys?

The answer is simple: the “Build It and They Will Come” philosophy, so prevalent across the United States and elsewhere, simply does not guarantee success. Time and time again we see examples of science centres failing to achieve and maintain attendance goals.

Rather, when faced with competition from shopping, entertainment and recreational opportunities, ever-changing public interest, and fluctuating economics—science centres must take a different approach. They must be willing to ask the hard questions about the visitor experience—their “product”. And they need to ask questions about how they deliver that product.



Fig. 1. Science Playground built on the Indian model: New York Hall of Science.



Fig. 2. Coney Island Wonder Wheel: Dan Wharton.

On any given day, visitors have many choices for an outing

A good place to start is to look at your institution and ask three basic, yet difficult questions about what your science centre does:

- * “So what?”
- * “Who cares?”
- * “What does it mean to the visitor?”

Asking these questions can be challenging, yet this is an ideal way to get into the mindset of a potential visitor. The public does not arrive at your admissions desk simply because you exist. They have gone through a consumer's decision-making process and have determined that on this particular day, coming to the science centre is their first choice.

Start Every Plan with Research

So who are these consumers and how do you best reach them? In order to maximize resources, all planning should start with research:

- * To determine what you already know
- * To determine what you learn from others
- * What did we learn from attendance?

Attendance Patterns



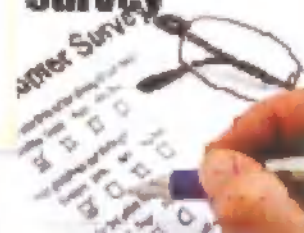
What Did We Learn?



Marketing Action Items



Visitor Satisfaction Survey



Whether you're considering creating a new exhibition, bringing in a travelling exhibition, launching new demonstrations, or developing a marketing plan, each effort should begin with research.

Ascertain what's been done, what's worked, who your competitors are, timing, pricing, etc. Think about personal consumer habits.

Research data can be gathered in many ways, both from primary and secondary sources. The Association of Science-Technology Centres commissions annual research surveys which can be purchased. And local tourism and city economic studies, or data from NCSM journals and the annual report can be very useful. This data can include trends in consumer-spending and attendance as well as benchmark comparisons. Also, don't hesitate to talk with colleagues from other cultural institutions in your city—or your science centre colleagues across the country. It is always helpful to understand what is typical about attendance patterns among your peers, and what is different at your particular science centre. Likewise, it is helpful to understand what types of offerings are successful in drawing visitors of different ages and background, and what pricing and seasons seem to be most popular. Learning from others is a good first step.

Your visitors are the primary source of marketing information for your science centre. To understand them, you can conduct brief, targeted surveys. Following these six simple steps can yield valuable results, including must-have action offerings:

1. Brainstorm with co-workers what it is you need to know from your audience that will help you manage your facility, determine your mix of offerings, and price what you offer while you grow attendance.
2. Develop a focused list (no more than 10) questions that will help you learn what it is you need to know.
3. Determine the best way to implement this questionnaire (small groups, visitor exit interviews at your science centre and outside the centre, mailer, web site, etc.).
4. Collect the responses. You may need to provide an incentive for respondents -- free tickets to special shows, a science centre pen or key chain -- in order to increase participation.
5. Compile the data.
6. Now get back with that brainstorming group and determine what you've learned and what you are going to do with your findings.

SAMPLE VISITOR EXIT SURVEY

1) Is this your first visit?

(follow up question if first: "How did you hear about the science center?")

(follow up question if have come before: "How many times do you come in a year?")

2) Can you tell me how many adults and children came with you today?

(follow up question if children: "What are the ages of the children?")

3) What were your interests in coming to the science center? (check all that apply)

Interest in science/technology	<input type="checkbox"/>
Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Educational	<input type="checkbox"/>
Holiday/sightseeing	<input type="checkbox"/>

Bring children	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bring guests	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recommended by friends	<input type="checkbox"/>

4) What were some of your favorites today (As needed, prompt with names of exhibits, workshops, demonstrations, IMAX shows)

5) Did you buy Special show tickets (list purchase opportunities)

Did you buy food or snacks?

Did you buy souvenirs at the gift counter?

6) Did you talk with or ask help of any staff while you were here?

(follow up question to ascertain what kind of staff – uniformed?, in exhibits etc.)

(follow up question: Were staff helpful? Unhelpful? In what way?)

7) Did you experience any inconveniences in your visit today?

8) What parts of your visit today did you like best?

9) We want to understand where our visitors come from? Can you tell us what neighbourhood or village you live in?

10) What language(s) do you speak at home?

This process is only valuable if you act on what the data tells you. Even if you cannot fully respond to visitor input, you can usually begin with a response. (For instance, if exhibit labels are too detailed or the print is too small, you may incorporate this feedback as you develop new exhibitions. You may or may not be able to fund the redesign of existing labels. Likewise, if visitors complain about unclean restrooms and a part of the problem is that the fixtures themselves need to be replaced, you can nonetheless keep floors and existing fixtures very clean at all times.)

The Core Visitor

Key to admission marketing is understanding core audience. Simply defined, the science centre's core audience is the specific population who attend most often. For example: Many science centres in the world have two core audiences:

- * Primary and secondary students coming in school groups.
- * Families with pre-teenage children.

The science centre's exhibitions, events and programs are geared toward these people.

To define core visitors, one needs to determine specific demographic characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, education, household income, and marital and parental status. This data can be obtained by conducting a survey using the five-step approach previously discussed. For example, if a science centre wants to identify core-audience characteristics:

- * A visitor demographic survey can be developed.

- * This survey might be implemented at the admission areas by staff or student interns.
- * The survey needs to be administered over a period of time. For instance, think about surveying twice a week for six weeks during the period that school groups come most frequently, and on six weekends during the busiest family visitation season.
- * Compile the survey results.
- * Share results with staff for analysis and feedback.
- * Think together and then act on understanding who the decision maker is (the person who brings the visitors), what they are looking for, how often they visit and what represents a "successful" visit. Knowing all these will influence what you say on your web-site and in your advertising, as well as how you design exhibitions, programs and demonstrations.

Helpful tip:

Repeat as many survey questions as possible in subsequent years to keep the questions consistent. This gives you the best chance of assembling parallel data and trends to measure improvement and guide your planning.

Why is it important to have a clear picture of core audience? Simple: this is the target market for your audience development efforts. For overall growth in the numbers you serve, it is easiest and most cost effective to grow more core audience. If your science centre's core audience is a family of two adults with four children—2 pre-schoolers, 1 in elementary and 1 in secondary school—it will be easier to locate, target and grow this audience than to locate, target and develop an audience of two adults without children in the household. If your decision maker is commonly a 30-year-old father or a 23-year-old mother, then you can advertise in print and electronic media which targets them.



Fig. 4.

Plan Annually, Adjust Quarterly

Plans are designed to change, that's true. But when planning your admissions marketing, it's important to take the approach that what you are planning today you will commit to for 12 months. This often means that your marketing plan—including the costs of surveys and advertising, graphics, your web-site, and public relations activities—must be assembled about 4 months before the beginning of your fiscal year so that next year's budget includes your planned expenses.

Plan first and then implement. Avoid the urge to change direction when small bumps appear. Otherwise, you'll end up stuck in a reactionary cycle that's counter productive to your goals. After all, if the plan was well developed, you will need the entire year in order to reach your goals. That's not to say that you shouldn't adjust to the economic climate, to sweeping changes to reduce public travel (like last year's chikungunya outbreak that stifled so many outings in Delhi) or to changing circumstances at your science centre. Plan your 12-month marketing campaign, schedule your media buys and public relation



Fig. 5. You never plan to fail but fail to plan!

Helpful tip:

How much should we budget? 5% of a science centre operating budget is a common benchmark for designing, producing, and buying space for advertising. However, science centres that depend upon earned income to support more than 50% of their operating costs often spend more. And other science centres spend less. The key is to start with the assumption that buying advertising to publicize the most popular offerings at the most popular seasons of the year should help increase your total visitation. Remember to think about marketing as an investment in audience growth, not an administrative expense.

releases, design and produce your pieces and release them on schedule. If your calendar includes running a promotion during a particular period, don't back away from that strategy simply because the previous months may have been tough. Stay the course.

Scenario in India-Mind-Set

Science Centres in India are largely public funded institutions, therefore, who comes or does not come, hardly matters. Quality of exhibit not the visitor experience or satisfaction, is still regarded as the key parameter of success.

'Build it and they will come' is still the perception in most of the science centres. The builder's satisfaction or curatorial brilliance matters not what visitors would take it as or experience or benefit from, is not the concern of the developer. Market driven approach or practicing marketing as a tool, is yet to be accepted as a key function of science centres. Science Centres under National Council of Science Museums network, however, have in principle, incorporated marketing in their mission. Audience and revenue targets are set in successive annual plans. These targets are monitored and extra efforts are put to achieve them. Visitor feedback, responses or audience/market research is negligible with exception in Science Centres under NCSM (there are some centres outside NCSM network) who gather audience data at regular intervals and take remedial measures.

To understand audience one needs authentic research data. But in Indian Science Centres no marketing or audience research units function. It is practiced to some extent through education staff.

The visitor exit survey questionnaire is often too long. This results in casual responses from visitor who do not show enough interest. No incentives for filling the survey form are offered. We need to act on visitor responses. Some of the visitor complaints or suggestions are simple to implement.

What's working in Science Centres in India?

Even though 'marketing' as a tool to enhance audience base and revenue in Indian Science Centres is not a key function; Science Centres under the National Council of Science Museums network implemented several uniform marketing activities based on success in some Science Centre or localized schemes to market the Centres. In fact, now annual target for audience numbers and revenue generation are set 3 months prior to beginning of a fiscal year (A fiscal year starts on April 1 and ends on March 31). Quarterly reviews by central administration and monthly reviews by individual centres help to take corrective measures or augment efforts to achieve targets. Audience surveys are regular and actions to meet audience expectations as learnt from surveys are taken periodically. Efforts that have brought a fair degree of success include:

- * **Inclusive, responsive, reflective approach.**
- * **Segment Marketing.**
- * **Creating strong brand 'science education resource centres'.**

- * **Focusing on repeat visitors to create 'Word of Mouth'.**
- * **Creating new experiences and periodic content upgradation.**
- * **Use of digital technology.**

Under the inclusive approach, special events, attractive revenue options including economical package options, inexpensive tickets including free entry for under privileged and poor sections of society, were implemented across all science centers. Activities for various segments; homemakers, differently abled, school dropouts or unschooled, senior citizens, teachers, students, tourists were introduced. This approach brought in many first time visitors that had multiplying effect on repeat visitors.

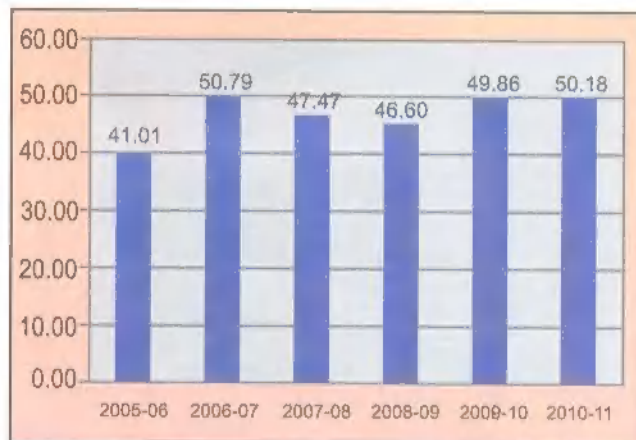


Fig. 6. Repeat visitors (%) to Science City.



Fig. 7. Auto drivers day at Science Centre in Kerala.



Fig. 8. Technology access programme for senior citizens.

Once exposed to the unique and satisfying experience of science centres, the same audience becomes publicity generator or key influencer. For example an 'Auto Drivers Day'- a free visit for the families at a Science Centre in Kerala or 'Taxi Drivers Day' at Science City, Kolkata, helped to develop canvassers in auto drivers for science centres.

Under segment marketing, the approach was to reach out to those who either did not visit the Science Centre or were unaware of such facility in the city or town.



Fig. 9. Solar eclipse-watching for village women.



Fig. 10. Reaching out to public - sky watch at sea beach.

Methods such as distributing leaflets to household through newspaper vendors, public at sea beaches, busy market places, parks, traffic junctions, housing complexes, railway stations helped to publicize the centres. However, special events and activities for various segments had greater impact in creating 'word-of-mouth' publicity.

Exit surveys, surveys at public places to assess branding, awareness, opinion, placing in public priority etc. brought in new set of data that provided new insights and helped to design new programmes, exhibit themes, pricing policy etc. One startling revelation was made by such survey at Science City, Kolkata was its image as an expensive and entertainment venue. Subsequently advertisements 'See Science City at Rs.20/-' and focusing on educational role of Science City paid dividend and resulted in almost 25 per cent increase in footfall and substantial increase in revenue generation. Similarly, the survey in Nehru Science Centre, Mumbai, brought out need for opening the Science Centre one hour earlier for schools. A small intervention, changing the opening hours from 11:30 am to 10:30 am increased the student visitors by over one hundred thousand.

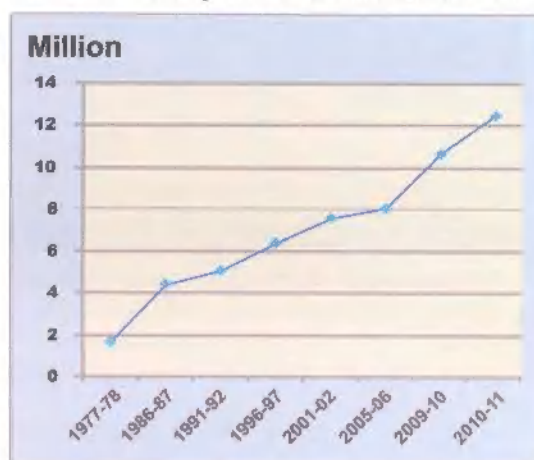


Fig. 11. Visitors to science centres under NCSM (combined)

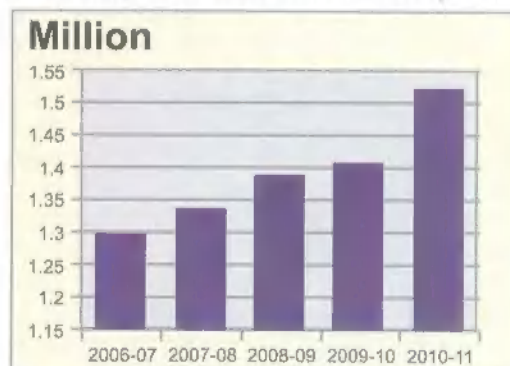


Fig. 12. Visitors to Science City, Kolkata.

The Science Centres in India also regularly upgrade their content and experiences i.e., exhibits on new themes, new science shows and demonstrations, and new engaging activities. This has resulted in increase of footfall, specially repeat visitors and consequential revenue generation.



Fig. 13. Modernization of Exhibition Galleries.

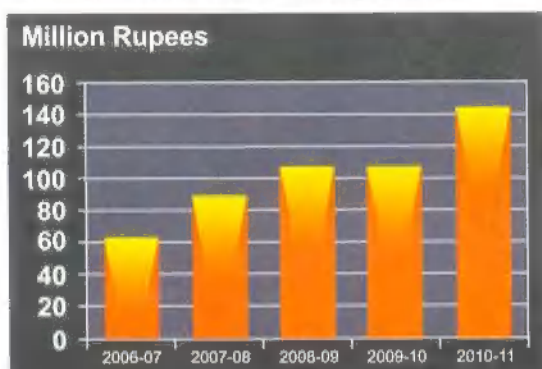


Fig. 14. Revenue growth from public in NCSM centres.

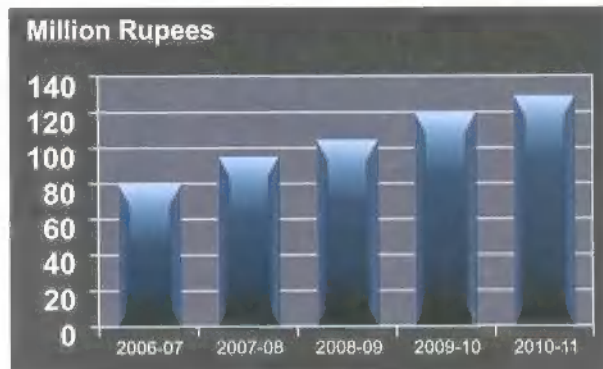


Fig. 15. Revenue generation at Science City.

Marketing of Science Centres needs a professional and business like approach as they deal with variety of audiences having divergent economic, social, psychological and educational backgrounds. Marketing also needs to be accepted as a key function of Science Centres irrespective of their financial operating model if they have to remain relevant and succeed in their goals.



Marilyn Hoyt

Consulting on non-profit development
nationally & internationally
Former CEO, New York Hall of Science.
mhoyt@gmail.com



G. S. Rautela

Director General
National Council of Science Museums
Kolkata, India.
dgo@ncsm.gov.in



Michael Savino

President
Headline Communications, Inc.
New York.
michael@headlineinc.com